

The Sense of Violation: Notes toward a Definition of "Southern" Fiction

By MARION MONTGOMERY

THE seminar game of what makes contemporary and recent Southern fiction so fascinating to the world outside the South continues, and the voice of the explainer promises to be heard pretty long throughout the land. *Time Magazine*, as one might expect, has the golden key. In its review of Carson McCullers' *Clock Without Hands*, it says: "Violence colors the surface of Southern writing, but its core is a sense of violation." True, so true. But the statement itself, as *Time* puts it in its review, seems to reflect a surface understanding, as might also be expected. The evaluations that come to us from beyond the paper curtain, not only from such popular commentators as *Time* but also from such literary critics as Alfred Kazin, repeatedly comment on Southern fiction as if violence and grotesqueness were its unique characteristics—as if one doesn't find violence and grotesqueness in Algren or Hemingway or Dreiser or Dos Passos. It is as if Southern fiction were some strange and exotic plant which does not grow on native grounds. Violence, surely, is the sine qua non of fiction, whether it be a general slaughter of wolers or the sagging character presented through the fluoroscope stream of consciousness, that magic lantern that throws the nerves in patterns on a screen—whether it be violence as handled by Homer and Faulkner or Euripides and Joyce. Violence, then, doesn't set "Southern" fiction off from "Northern" fiction, though *violation* does suggest the key to what I believe its distinguishing characteristic. To speak of the typical is dangerous but necessary, and so I shall say that the difference between good Southern fiction (in which term I do not include all fiction that uses the South) and good Eastern or Midwestern fiction (which I shall hereafter label "Northern" fiction) is the different sense of man's part in the violation peculiar to each fiction.

A "Southern" writer, such as Faulkner, is more nearly kin to Homer and Aeschylus than is a "Northern" writer like Stephen Crane. Odysseus risks outraging Poseidon because the principle of hospitality is grossly violated by Polyphemus. And it is with violence that he

summons the god's wrath, by blinding his son Polyphemus. The consequences he expects, and he struggles against the ocean, battered by the reef, not purely to survive (though life is sweet to him as to Crane's hero in "The Open Boat") but because there is in him a strong sense of his own rightness in blinding Polyphemus, a feeling that the more remote god, Zeus, and his laws take precedence over the immediate, though threatening, god of the sea. Unlike Crane's introspective newspaper reporter, Odysseus knows very well what temple there is to throw rocks at, and his struggle to survive is the manner in which he throws his rocks. The virtue of Odysseus over Crane's hero doesn't have to do with whether there is, in fact, a Poseidon as opposed to no god at all, but that Odysseus possesses, in addition to his sense of rightness, the courage of self-responsibility. This is an extremely important difference so far as my concern for the fascination of the Southern hero goes, because whatever the psychological explanations, the human mind responds quite differently to Odysseus as he struggles up the beach than to Crane's newspaper reporter. Odysseus stands straighter for his experience, one feels—after his night's sleep. Crane's characters sag.

Or consider (instead of Homer's comedy), as a measure of definition of Southern writing, Aeschylus' tragedy, where the consequences of personal violation make a better parallel to the consequences of merely happening to be in the world by accident as in Crane's tragedy. In that Abraham-Isaac situation at Aulis, an act of violation by Agamemnon is inescapable; either he must slay his daughter upon the altar or bring distress to his companions in arms. Which? Damnation lies either way. Agamemnon attempts to act in the direction of the lesser evil, but he must (because he is a man and not a woman) act. The inability to act, we might remember, is considered in Homer and Aeschylus to be a womanish trait. Agamemnon must act, and, as Aeschylus is quick always to remind us, man is less than the gods and doomed therefore to self-delusion. Agamemnon knows as much, but he takes upon himself the terrible possibilities of his act. That "frenzied counselor" delusion, says Aeschylus, leads him to boldness. Agamemnon himself by his decision seeks the knife that waits him after his triumph at Troy; he is aware that the flaw in the universe is at least partly in himself.

How does "Southern" writing compare to Aeschylus and Homer? I am not interested in such concerns as whether the study of Greek

and Latin in the Old South is the source of an influence but only in the obvious presence of such a kinship. Though it may seem absurd at first sight, compare the hero of the first great "Southern" novel, Huck Finn, in the midst of his journey to Agamemnon at Aulis as presented by Aeschylus. When Huck Finn says with such finality, "All right then, I'll go to hell," siding with Jim, we are moved more than amused. It is the high point of the novel we feel. Not, however, because Huck is on the right side of the slavery question, as we have been conditioned to applaud, for Twain's book, almost in spite of Twain, is something greater than a revised version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Huck is firmly of the belief that he may very likely go to hell for his act, and if we smile at his innocent seriousness, it is largely our way of applauding courage. Similarly, Odysseus. All right then, says Odysseus, I'll risk Poseidon's wrath—and thereupon he blinds Polyphemus. This is not the place to attempt in detail the relating of frontier humor to the Greekness of Southern fiction except through figurative suggestions (though one should consider whether Homer's humor is not in fact frontier humor): it is as if, in Southern fiction such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Hamlet*, *The Violent Bear It Away*, one has a combination of Homer and Aeschylus. And it is important to remember that, just as in Homer, the humor in these novels is a serious humor. Look at the straight faces of Faulkner's actors (as opposed to his story teller) in *The Hamlet*. The actions seem preposterous to an outsider (but then so is Agamemnon's slaying of his daughter to appease Artemis); those involved with spotted horses are led to a serious boldness by that "frenzied counselor" delusion, though the effect is comic.

On a level where there is less concern for man's outrageously comic relationship to the world, let us look at the serious, straight-faced, humorless Southern fiction—though one seldom finds all humor removed. Compare William Faulkner's version of the dynasty builder, Thomas Sutpen, to the Northern version of John Dos Passos' J. Ward Morehouse. The sense of violation and earned retribution hovers over *Absalom, Absalom!* as it does not over *U. S. A.* Sutpen is a self-doomed man, and he knows it, and the sign of his knowledge is his restless drive to escape the furies angered by his violations. Morehouse, on the other hand, is a Model-A, not a man, with gas enough to get him a certain distance before the new model with its higher octane fuel overtakes him. Sutpen is man caught alive and kicking in permanent

art; Morehouse is inevitably destined for waxwork display in some Smithsonian Institute of literary history. Or take Dreiser's version of Sutpen, Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, where the self-responsibility is largely explained by environmental determinism. Griffiths is a case study of the sagging character that I take as typical of the Northern grotesque, of the man so cut off from the ennobling possibilities of violation (whether divinely right or satanically wrong) that he cannot move his hand to take a life or to save one. He is depressingly pathetic. It is as if Dreiser's main purpose is to comment that something is missing in the Northern view of man, whether that man "succeeds" as Dos Passos' hero does for the moment or fails miserably as does Clyde Griffiths.

But consider a Clyde Griffiths by a Southern writer. Who cannot see something more noble than Griffiths in Flannery O'Connor's Francis Marion Tarwater, who comes to an inescapable moment of life so much like Clyde Griffiths'? Like Clyde's, Francis Marion's final temptation occurs on a boat in a lake, and with the alternative of saving or taking a life—of baptizing or drowning God's or the Devil's (he wonders which) implacable accuser, the moron child whose love seems unbearable. Tarwater knows, as Miss O'Connor puts it in her title to the novel's first chapter when it appeared in *New World Writing*, that "You Can't Be Any Poorer than Dead." It is his life he risks, not at man's hands, but at God's. His is Agamemnon's dilemma, and Huck's, put squarely in Christian terms: to baptize the child is to be enslaved to his great Uncle and the terrible Christ that haunts him for Adam's sin; to drown the child is to become enslaved to his immediate uncle, an environmental determinist, and to that more terrible Devil whose name is Nada who art in Nada, as a famous Northern writer has put it. Tarwater's act of drowning the child in those terrible moments becomes, paradoxically, an act of baptism also, and he—less prideful—rises to the new life of self-responsibility, terrified by the inevitable loving wrath of God. For in spite of his will to be free, he has come to an uneasy understanding of that idea which in Christian terms (but also terms familiar to Aeschylus) says that one gives up his will to God, whose service is the only perfect freedom. It is an understanding to be earned through violation. Tarwater, like Huck and Agamemnon, has said, "All right then, I'll go to hell. It is my act," the first step toward any redemption of a free man as opposed to a machine man. Unless Christ be willingly slain, he cannot harrow

hell and rise triumphant; unless God be offended, there can be no merciful salvation. What an inevitably telling title then: *The Violent Bear It Away*. Not just from the days of John the Baptist, for ever since the days of Homer and Aeschylus, at least, the kingdom of Heaven has been given to the violent, and the violent bear it away. Grotesque? Aeschylus would not have thought so, who says

. . . to us, though against our very will,
even in our own despite,
comes wisdom
by the awful grace of God.

It is even probable that the father of Greek tragedy, who was concerned with the actor's masks and costuming so that his figure might loom large before his audience, might well have considered J. Ward Morehouse and Clyde Griffiths far more grotesque than Francis Marion Tarwater or Sutpen. Prometheus with the vulture at his liver, as huge as he is, is not so grotesque a figure of man as is Mickey Mouse.

This, then, rather than the surface materials of Southern fiction, in large part explains the fascination that Southern fiction has for readers in and out of the South: that informing sense one finds at its heart, a sense of man's awful responsibility. When Mencken was attacking the poverty of the South's contribution to art, ridiculing the Bible Belt morality, he did not appreciate that the immediate pressures of the South's history made it impossible for the South to meet a magazine's or newspaper's deadline for submission of art. For the South's has been a history which until recently required its masculine energies toward more immediate ends. Odysseus does not sing of Troy until Troy's fall and his own safe landing in the land of the Phaeacians. While waiting to sing, the South was holding firmly to an older view of man's relation to the world than the new sciences and philosophies of the North would allow. The masculine energies of the mid-nineteenth century South were occupied by the political and military destinies of the South—leaving, as it must, its art to the feminine mind, such a mind as Henry Timrod's or Edgar Allan Poe's. After 1865, there was the problem of sheer survival, and again art was left to the feminine mind, to Sidney Lanier and Thomas Nelson Page, while the masculine mind conjured for itself Agamemnon's waiting knife, in one way or another, in a Southern or Northern way.

The Southern: consider Wade Hampton, a fabulous general as wily as Odysseus in the war, as full of blind rage for justice as a Greek hero. When Hampton sees his son fall mortally wounded before him, he kisses him a farewell that Odysseus and Hector would be moved by, and turns back to the battle which he controls, as full of righteous anger as ever Achilles knew. He fought until the end, until Appomattox was already history, and in the end returned to South Carolina to rebuild the burned state, the hero of his people who sent him to the Senate, until the demagogue Ben Tillman—the liberal, shouting “nigger”—unseated him. If he would appear in the state legislature as it came to a vote on the senatorship, his friends urged, the legislature could not but honor him. But in such a supplication there could be no honor, and he refused: “The Senatorship is a place to be bestowed and not to be sought or begged for.”

The Northern way, the way a Southern mind metamorphoses to a Northern: consider John B. Gordon of Georgia. A brilliant general, and a courageous one in the war. At Appomattox with his tattered troops receiving and returning the salute of the Federal troops with such dignity that the pain on both sides was almost unbearable, only to ride away from Appomattox with a northern congressman with railroad interests, and to a concern for railroads and power, using his war glory in later years as Ben Tillman used “nigger” to expand and hold his power. A Southern and a Northern way: Wade Hampton and John B. Gordon; John Sartoris and J. Ward Morehouse. Which is by way of saying that Southern writing is very much aware of the Civil War, but that the war is only part of the background. Wade Hampton and Lee are important figures in our myth, not only for their having lost their Troy, but also for the manner of their homecoming. Wade Hampton comes home to be slain by his Clytemnestra, South Carolina; John B. Gordon comes home to slay his, Georgia. To understand this distinction is to understand Colonel Sartoris in Faulkner and why he commits suicide, in effect, though Redmond is the instrument: Sartoris dies for fear he will murder his own.

The South, then, during and after the return of whatever tragic Agamemnons or wily Odysseuses, held tightly to its most basic unifying heritage, not one that grew so simply out of the Old South of the slave plantation, the moonlight and magnolia tradition of Thomas Nelson Page, as the North is romantically fond of thinking. The violation at the heart of Southern fiction may sometimes be presented sym-

bolically through the race question, but that slavery and a sense of guilt in the Southern mind concerning the Negro is the gospel truth is only the Northern version of moonlight and magnolias. If one reads that cycle of powerful stories by Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, with the idea I have tried to develop, he may begin to feel that here is another Homer, singing of a crime against some god of the land instead of god of the sea, requiring expiation that may be a comic one, as in "Was" or more nearly tragic as in "The Bear." Faulkner does not take his Southern pen on shoulder and go to New York to write for strangers who do not recognize it as a Southern pen, as Robert Penn Warren of late, we hope unwittingly, has done. For in his recent book, *The Legacy of the Civil War*, Warren, like *Time*, finds an easy key to the South—the sense of guilt. Mr. Warren should remember that the prophecy requires Odysseus to return to Ithaca to find a peaceful death. Mr. Faulkner has taken his Southern oar to Stockholm, and has now come home holding still firmly his and our and man's one principle of humanity which makes survival either possible or desirable—that terrible sense of personal responsibility which holds that man violates the world and the gods at least as much as the world and gods (or history, in Mr. Warren's terms) violate him.

It is this basic principle that such diverse Southerners as the violent Protestant preachers of Flannery O'Connor's novels and the Catholic writer herself share, just as it was once the basic principle that Willie Starke and Robert Penn Warren shared, though they seem to have become estranged I think, since *Brother to Dragons*. Appreciating this principle, one can see that the hard cold light Miss O'Connor casts on the Southern characters in her fiction is not Miss O'Connor's open invitation to the reader to ridicule them, as her strong sense of humor leads some readers to suppose. There is as much praise as condemnation—not praise of the folly and wrong-headedness that is as inevitable to a Southerner as to a Northerner, but praise of the courage of willing self-responsibility for the delusion that led toward folly and wrong-headedness. If her characters are blind, which is another way of saying they are human (as we learn from Sophocles' *Oedipus*), the ones she admires are those obviously willing to bear the consequences of their blindness—Bible salesman or Misfit. Hers is the hard cold light of love, the salient quality of which I would call masculine. One might, in fact, point out that those characters of her fiction with whom she is least sympathetic are precisely those who have lost their sense of "Southern-

ness," who have been changed by Gordon's railroad, Henry Grady's industry, and the immediate products thereof—including television. Consider her sociologist-characters, or the people her Misfit slaughters in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Except for their speech patterns, they are initially more Northern than Southern.

Which brings me to a final comment on the difference between "Northern" and "Southern" fiction. When I call Faulkner's and Flannery O'Connor's fiction masculine, I imply that the Northern fiction I've talked about is feminine. The difference concerns the backbone the hero is left with when his actions are over, whether he sags into our pity or stands resolutely before our pity. It is the difference between Sutpen and Francis Marion Tarwater on the one hand and Clyde Griffiths and J. Ward Morehouse on the other. But it needs to be said that there is a special sub-species of Northern fiction which is confused with what I have meant by Southern. I will call it Northern writing which uses Southern materials. People who would not dream of calling Hemingway a Spanish writer because of some of his Spanish stories nevertheless call Truman Capote or Tennessee Williams Southern writers because of their Southern stories and plays. It is quite common, in fact, to find Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Capote, Carson McCullers all yoked together as Southern fiction writers of the same stamp. The temptation with McCullers and O'Connor is well nigh irresistible, since both are Georgians. But surely Capote and McCullers are feminine writers in my terms—"Northern" writers. When *Time Magazine* complains of Southern writing as depending more on mood than craftsmanship, citing Mrs. McCullers as the particular example, the comment is wide of any telling mark. (In some of his work Faulkner is not unworthy of comparison to Joyce as craftsman, and *Time's* writer must have a very peculiar definition of craftsmanship if he misses Miss O'Connor's skill in her recent novel or Eudora Welty's careful pen.) The criticism does bear some relevance when applied, not to Southern writing but to Northern, when applied to McCullers and Capote and Hemingway and Dos Passos and Dreiser. For mood writing itself is a substitute for a sense of the outraged reaction to violation. Without a character with a strong sense of violation and of its consequences, a writer is almost forced to a dependence upon mood in action's stead. The loneliness that *Time* finds at the heart of Miss McCuller's fiction is related to this very characteristic of her technique, for the loneliness grows from a basic conception of man's

relationship to the world quite unlike that of Faulkner or O'Connor. Nor does the self-responsibility in Miss O'Connor's characters mean an isolation of the character: it means quite the contrary, since the character's self-responsibility defines for him his relationship to the world. In the South of Southern fiction (as opposed to fiction *about* the South) the violation is taken personally and the violence is personal: if you kill a man, you at least know his name and why he in particular is the victim, and that is something quite different from the accidental slaughter by auto on a turnpike or the knifing of a stranger in Central Park. It is a more human violence than that in a story by Capote where the violence lacks the burden of responsibility, especially on the victim's part. I think that just such a distinction as this may explain that rather puzzling incident in Miss O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*, in which Tarwater, after murdering the child, is impersonally seduced by the citified homosexual, a leather-jacket boy in a convertible. Here is the old enemy again, not an excuse or explanation, the old enemy innocent of responsibility, and therefore more innocent and dangerous than Tarwater, though the surface worldly knowledge of each makes it appear the other way round. No wonder Tarwater tries to bring judgment day, set the world on fire.

Carson McCullers' and Truman Capote's world is a dream world through which characters float in search of an awakening. Their characters have a grotesqueness which defines them as separate from mankind, while Faulkner's and O'Connor's characters have their grotesqueness as a definition of their relationship. Consequently, McCullers' and Capote's fiction bear about the same relation to the "Southern" fiction I have been defining as a bale of cotton in the Atlanta Airport Terminal bears to the South. The isolation from or relation to mankind is, as it must be, always primarily in the author. If loneliness is his understanding, he can write a kind of autobiography from a character's insides—his own—or he can describe a character from the outside, using lyric mood to disguise his detachment. That is the way Joyce, in some of his stories, convinces one of sympathetic irony. But there is always a detachment, which I think reflects a sickness of "Northern" writing. This is not to say that Capote or McCullers or Joyce are incapable of "good" writing; it is merely a way of saying that there is a fascinating healthiness in Southern writing, whose power comes finally not from its local materials but from the writer's sense that, good or bad, we are members one of another and violate each other and

must pay for the violation (usually through violence) because of the wrathful love of whatever gods we believe in. Ultimately a writer with this sense of violation and its consequences will leave the longest scar on the world. (For art itself is a species of violence.)

There are, of course, Southern and Northern readers, and a Northern reader, who has been lost from the old tradition of man's responsibility to the gods and the world, usually experiences an uncomfortable shock of recognition when confronted by Southern fiction; he is puzzled because he is at once alien to the land he has entered and at home in it. He has intimations of immortality from that older childhood of his race which he had explained away so that he might forget it. He becomes fascinated, even sometimes revolted, not knowing whether to believe the character a mirror or wish it a mirage. If he is patient, I believe, he will come to realize that "Southern" fiction is not finally about the South at all, but about that human heart Faulkner talks of in his famous Nobel Prize speech, that speech being Faulkner's act of driving an oar in foreign ground before turning home. It is not Southern writing, but writing about the human heart at war with itself and the gods, capable of terrible violations, but capable also of the terrible consequences of violation through which alone, as Aeschylus says, its awful wisdom comes.

Something Held My Will

"something held my will"—Emily Dickinson

LIFE it was that held your will.
Death has let you go.
It is neither time nor place
Can trap and keep you now.

You can step the centuries
Nimbly, like a faun,
To see how all the stories end,
How long the empires run.
(For O. H. W.)

—CECIL COBB WESLEY